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ABSTRACT

A review of the clinically relevant literature on prevention of child maltreatment was conducted in an attempt to provide: (1) a definition and theoretical understanding of some aspects of prevention, child maltreatment, and social support systems; (2) a proposal of the usefulness of social isolation as an important theme in interpreting the results of research; and (3) information valuable to the clinician, researcher, and religious leader in developing effective programs. Some psychologists have adopted a medical/treatment model for dealing with child maltreatment while other community psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers have preferred a community/educational model. The Christian church has offered pastoral counseling, fellowship groups, and home visitors. Proposed treatment orientations have generally adopted an ecological perspective. This approach is comprehensive enough to encompass the multiple factors that have been correlated with child maltreatment, including factors involving family interactions, the immediate environment, and the culture of those affected. The isolation of the family has been shown to be an effective unifying theme throughout the literature on child maltreatment. This isolation can be partially countered by the development and effective use of social support systems. Both the psychological and the religious communities acknowledge the importance of support systems in preventing child maltreatment. While treatment will always be needed, prevention must become a priority in combating child maltreatment. A six-page reference list is provided. (NB)

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PREVENTION OF CHILD MALTREATMENT:
THE USE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Doctoral Research Paper
for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology

ROSEMEAD SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

BIOLA UNIVERSITY

DALE ROBERT ANDERSON

1986

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PREVENTION OF CHILD MALTREATMENT:
THE USE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

BY

DALE ROBERT ANDERSON

A doctoral research paper submitted to
Rosemead School of Psychology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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1986

PREVENTION OF CHILD MALTREATMENT
THE USE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

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Abstract

This paper reviews current literature on the prevention of child maltreatment with the goal of providing the mental health professional or church leader with a concise understanding of the field. Isolation of the abusive family, a necessary condition for the occurrence of child maltreatment, and social support systems are organizing concepts. They provide important variables to keep in mind when conducting research, reviewing the literature, or planning preventive programs. Both the psychological and the religious communities acknowledge the importance of support systems. As a consequence, this serves as an area in which they can pool their resources. The importance of prevention to the field of child maltreatment is stressed.

Prevention of Child Maltreatment: The Use of Social Support Systems

Many children of all ages are abused and neglected by the people they rely on most for protection and comfort. Child maltreatment as a field of study encompasses all forms of abuse. It will be used here to refer to physical and emotional abuse and neglect. Sexual abuse has many similarities to physical abuse, but it will be excluded from this paper because it is dealt with more adequately when its unique aspects can be addressed at length. There is a massive amount of information regarding child maltreatment already available to the social scientist. This paper reviews the clinically relevant literature on prevention of child maltreatment with the goals of providing (a) a definition and theoretical understanding of some aspects of prevention, child maltreatment, and social support systems, (b) a proposal of the usefulness of social isolation as an important theme in interpreting the results of research, and (c) information valuable to the clinician, researcher, and religious leader in developing effective programs.

Definitions

Before getting into a discussion of the major issues, this section provides definitions for many of the key concepts in the field including maltreatment, ecological methodology, prevention, and social support system.

Maltreatment

Intent to do injury to the child is central to the idea and definition of child abuse. In a survey of mental health professionals, Starr (1979) obtained an 80% consensus on classifying certain behaviors as abusive based on intent alone, regardless of whether there was actual injury.

There is an apparent conflict between this definition and another given by McClelland (1973), who describes maltreatment as a "situationally defined incompetence in the role of caregiver." This implies that the parent is not responsible because they are incompetent rather than actively seeking to harm their children. McClelland's definition fits the ecological model because emphasizes the influence that the environment has on the family. The conflict can be resolved, however, by realizing that each definition is useful within a particular context. Establishing intent is important when trying to distinguish between an incident of corporal punishment and abuse. This is often needed in a court of law when there is some question as to the nature of the physical force used to punish. The "incompetence" definition is most useful in the context of a theoretical understanding of the causes of child maltreatment. The situations that render the caregiver incompetent will be discussed in this paper.

Ecological Methodology

Ecology has been defined, historically, as the progressive, mutual adaptation of organism and environment (Hawley, 1950). As it has been applied to child maltreatment by Bronfenbrenner (1976), the emphasis of ecological methodology is on the interdependent interaction of systems. These shape the context in which the child experiences maltreatment (Garbarino, 1977).

Belsky (1980) built on Bronfenbrenner's work to clarify distinctions among four systems that influence the abuser's environment. These primary structures of the ecological perspective are ontogenic development, the microsystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem.

Ontogenic development refers to the childhood histories of the parents. This usually includes a history of maltreatment in their own childhood. Individual differences and personality types are subsumed under this level. The contribution of the abuser's past to his or her abusiveness has wide-spread acceptance by researchers, although the evidence is limited mostly to correlational data (Parke & Collmer, 1975).

The microsystem contains interactions within the immediate family, including any behaviors by the child which may contribute to his or her abuse, spousal conflict, and the exchange of affection between members.

The exosystem emphasizes the embeddedness of the individual and the family within larger social units.

Researchers have divided the exosystem into two main areas, work and the neighborhood. Formal and informal support systems are viewed as a part of the neighborhood, and will be explained more fully in the remainder of this paper.

The macrosystem contains the cultural distinctions which impinge on the family. Examples are society's attitude toward violence, corporal punishment, and children.

This system was originally presented by Belsky (1980) in order to integrate and facilitate research. Belsky does not claim to have identified causal factors and argues that it is still premature to do so.

Prevention

There are three categories of prevention relevant to child maltreatment: primary, which prevents abuse from ever occurring; secondary, which deals with "at risk" individuals to prevent abuse from occurring; and tertiary, which helps abusive families keep from repeating their abuse. These categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, any intervention that is targeted toward the general public, such as a seminar, will almost always draw out from its audience either high risk (secondary) or abusive (tertiary) families. Because of their interactive quality, these categories may affect the person at various levels of his ecological system. The degree to which each type of prevention affects each level within this system needs to be assessed by future research.

Social Support System

The term social support system has been used by community psychologists to refer to

continuing social aggregates that provide individuals with opportunities for feedback about themselves and for validations for their expectations about others, which may offset deficiencies in these communications within the large community context. People have a variety of specific needs that demand satisfaction through enduring interpersonal relationships, such as for love and affection, for intimacy that provides the freedom to express feelings easily and unself-consciously, for validation of personal identity and worth, for satisfaction of nurturance and dependency, for help with tasks, and for support in handling emotion and controlling impulses.

They tell him (the individual) what is expected of him and they judge his performance (Caplan, 1974, pp. 4-6).

A support system is contained within a larger structural unit called a social network. A social network may be thought of in terms of the quantity of people with whom the person makes contact. A social support system is different from a social network in that a support system implies a certain quality to the existing relationships. Many people who are in the social network are excluded because they do not function in a supportive manner. Others, however, may be a small part of the larger social network and still function as a vital part of the support system. All that is needed for a person to qualify as part of someone's support system is that they have a functional relationship with them. Howze (1984) makes the distinction that "system" is

structural aspect. Because of this it is possible to have a social network that is intact, but it is either non-functioning or dysfunctional. In order for a network to qualify as a support system it must provide support in one of three areas: (a) instrumental-material, (b) emotional-social, or (c) informational-referral (Powell, 1980). Since the one common characteristic of those within the network is their relationship to the person, many people have a network around them but, because of their inability to develop and maintain a relationship, it does not qualify as a support system.

Overview

There are two major approaches for dealing with child maltreatment within the literature, the medical/treatment model and the community/educational model. The more common approach, based on the medical model and adopted by many psychologists, views child maltreatment as a disease, often psychopathological in nature. This approach is inherently problem oriented. In contrast, an alternative approach has been developed by community psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers. It is often educational in nature and those who use it prefer to work on improvement of family relations through education and other types of programs. It emphasizes the social and cultural aspects of the problem.

Apart from the two schools within psychology, but also having its own contribution to our understanding, the Christian church has many useful resources such as pastoral

counseling, fellowship groups, and home visitors, that could be utilized much more.

Recent advances in the field and the pressing problem of child maltreatment require the consideration of all three groups. Proposed treatment orientations have generally adopted an ecological perspective. This approach is comprehensive enough to encompass all of the multiple factors that have been correlated with child maltreatment, including factors involving family interactions, the immediate environment, and the culture of those affected.

The ecological framework as proposed by Belsky (1980) and Garbarino (1977) integrates individual variables that have been correlated with child maltreatment. These individual correlates have been identified in the past as characteristics of abusive parents, families, and children. It is valuable, however, to have an overview of these characteristics in order to establish a broad perspective and an intuitive feel for this very complex problem. The ecological framework includes four interrelated levels, the level of ontogenic development, the microsystem level, the exosystem level, and the macrosystem level.

The level of ontogenic development includes all the characteristics of the parent that they bring with them to the abusive situation. Many of these characteristics are problems associated with the parent's early development and socialization. Abusive parents tend to share childhood histories of maltreatment, exposure to other forms of

violence, a lack of nurturance and parental rejection. This predisposes them to become abusive or neglectful during times of excessive stress (Belsky, 1980). Vietze, Falsey, Sandler, O'Connor, and Altemeier (1980) include child-rearing attitudes and knowledge of children in their classification of parental history because abusers are demonstrably lower on these variables. Several sources have indirectly linked the lack of experience in caring for children and inadequate rehearsal of the parental role with later maltreatment (Whiting & Whiting, 1975; Elder, 1977). Zaphiris (1982) states that abusive parents are self-centered, suspicious, hostile, ignorant of child development, and unable to learn from experience without help. They only know how to use physical discipline and usually have a low self-esteem. Although it is tempting to name these and other personality characteristics as the causes of maltreatment, they provide incomplete explanations and must first be considered as they interact with the family and the environment.

The microsystem includes the characteristics of children that predispose them to be abused, interactions within the immediate family, antecedents of abusive incidents, and the contribution of marital conflict to child maltreatment. Premature infants are more susceptible to being abused than full-term controls. They often have abuse-eliciting characteristics such as an aversive cry and appearance (Egeland & Brunnequell, 1979). Their lack of social

responsiveness may also be a contributor to their own abuse. Often, any uniqueness in a child, such as retardation, biological irregularities, learning disabilities, and even giftedness may contribute to maltreatment.

The temperament of infants in general may elicit different responses from their parents. Butterfield et al. (1979) reported state organization, motor activity, responsiveness, and ease of arousal as factors predictive of hostile mothering. Colicky, hyperactive babies may interact with their caretakers to bring about abuse, whereas passive, lethargic babies may be severely neglected (Belsky, 1980). These characteristics do not provide complete explanations and must also be seen within the perspective of their ecology.

Part of the interactions within the family microsystem occur in the mother-child dyad. Burgess and Conger (1978) report that mothers displayed less positive (i.e., affectionate and supportive behavior) and more negative interactions (i.e., threats and complaints) than did control mothers. The abused children also displayed more negative behaviors, but it is impossible to determine whether it was the parental behavior or the child's negativity that started the hostility. Often it is a match, or "transaction", between the parent and the child that is the cause. This "transactional perspective" will be discussed later in this paper.

A common antecedent to abuse is the presence of a power struggle between parent and child. The child is usually defiant either verbally or behaviorally. A feeling of power on the part of the parent is brought about and reinforced by the compliance that ultimately follows an abusive incident. Any situation that causes stress, such as the wrecking of the family car, a poor report card, or breaking a cherished possession cannot cause abuse by itself. There must be a personal style that is prone to responding to stress with violence (Belsky, 1980).

The presence of increased marital conflict in abusive households is very common. Aggressive tactics and physical force are common among spouses, but because society discourages this, children become the targets of the displaced aggression. When the marriage is unsatisfactory, the roles within the family become disordered. Many parents have histories that have left them emotionally needy, and they place unrealistic expectations onto their children. Children are often abused, then, because they are unable to meet their parent's emotional needs. Often they intrude upon the spousal relationship in an attempt to be taken care of, only to be abused or rejected even more.

The ontogenic development level and the microsystem level contain many correlates of child maltreatment. They should be understood as they interact with other variables in the ecology of the abusive family.

The exosystem level contains variables such as formal and informal support systems, general community welfare, community agencies, and economic resources. The variables of social support systems and the overall isolation of the family from them make up the main focus of this paper. I have selected these particular variables to deal with at length because they are particularly useful for interventions and prevention.

The macrosystem level is important in gaining a broad perspective because it emphasizes the influence that the culture has on the problem. It provides a theoretical understanding of some of the survey data that show that an acceptance of violence, the use of corporal punishment, and an attitude of ownership of children is especially common in the United States. The influence that the culture exerts on the family and on parenting practices is enormous and cannot be adequately explained in a brief overview. The macrosystem will be considered in this paper along with the other levels of the ecological model as they interact with the variables of social support systems and the isolation of the family. The four levels make up the ecological perspective, one of the major approaches to understanding child maltreatment.

Another major approach has come from a community/educational model. The community psychology perspective uses social support systems as one way of promoting healthy functioning. Since the support system

construct is also part of the ecological perspective, it provides a common ground for mutual understanding. It not only provides a bridge between the two approaches, but it also serves as a point of access for churches and pastoral counselors who see themselves as resources to the community and providers of support to families.

By mobilizing these forces toward prevention it is possible to begin to reduce the occurrence of child maltreatment. Even though our current understanding is limited and the research is only beginning to contribute to our understanding of causative factors, the severity of the problem demands practical, cost effective programs and clinical intervention. Prevention is one way of impacting that problem.

Isolation Of The Family

The concept of isolation is not new, but lately it has been used extensively by Garbarino (1977) and others (Powell, 1980; Polansky, 1979; & Belsky, 1980) to indicate the state of existence of a family without effective support systems. They have found it to be a useful concept for organizing research in the area of child maltreatment. Both the traditional treatment and community oriented schools address this concept directly and it is also indirectly addressed by the leaders within the church.

This section attempts to show how isolation can be a unifying theme throughout the literature, such as in studies of prediction of maltreatment, parental perceptions, and in projects aimed at prevention.

A Unifying Theme

The degree of isolation of a family is a specific and measurable characteristic. Thus future empirical studies could investigate the antecedents of isolation in families and the effects of isolation on the likelihood of child maltreatment. One problem with isolation as a variable is its inherent confounding with many other variables.

One of these confounded relationships concerns the etiology of the abusive family's isolated condition. A good example of this interaction is that the absence of support systems is often of the family's own making. The parents' own poorly developed interpersonal skills create this tendency to become isolated (Polansky, 1979). Belsky (1980) proposes that whatever process actually accounts for the association between isolation and child maltreatment, it is clear that child abuse and neglect may result when a parent's developmental history conspires to keep him or her from establishing contacts with those very persons whose support can help prevent such abnormal parenting. Thus the ontogenic level directly influences the exosystem level of the ecological model.

The clearest association between isolation and child maltreatment was found by Gray, Cutler, Dean, and Kempe

(1977). In a two-year longitudinal study of "at-risk" mothers and their new babies, 50 mothers in the experimental group received regular visits from a nurse, making up what was termed a "potent" support system. The 50 controls received no support. Provision of this potent support system reduced child maltreatment significantly below levels in the control group. The likelihood of maltreatment varies not only with the availability, and adequacy, but also the proper use made of the supportive resources in the community. The authors were successful because they made sure their intervention was potent.

In his review of their study, Garbarino (1977) proposes five causes of isolation: (a) the developmental history of the parents, (b) social stresses which cut off the family from support systems, (c) mobility patterns, (d) the ability of the environment to provide feedback, and (e) an inadequate social service system. These "causes" cross over the ecological model's boundaries so that they cannot be adequately contained under just the exosystem, or neighborhood, aspect of the environment. The developmental history is subsumed under the ontogenic level, and family characteristics are a part of the microsystem. It is not as important in our theoretical understanding to know in which box to fit the construct as it is to recognize the interactions that take place within the system.

Survey data also support the notion that abusive families are isolated. In one study, 80% of abusers did not

have a significant relationship outside the family (Young, 1964). Watkins and Bradbard generated three hypotheses to account for this: (a) abusive parents become isolates to avoid detection, (b) abusive parents lack the social skills necessary for establishing and maintaining friendships, and (c) others avoid them because they disapprove of their child rearing. All three hypotheses imply that the parents are blameworthy for their own abusiveness. This is consistent with the emphasis of the ecological approach on the interaction between the family and their environment. Isolation can be understood, then, as both the cause and result of abuse.

Prediction Of Maltreatment

Prediction of child maltreatment is often the first step in prevention. In a well designed study of maternal-infant interaction, Vietze et al., (1980) proposed a "transactional" perspective in understanding the multiple determinants of early child maltreatment.

According to their research with over 498 mother-infant dyads, the "parental background" factor was the best predictor of child maltreatment. It included the mothers' histories, their attitude toward parenting, the environment they live in, feelings about the pregnancy, availability of support, personality, stress, and parenting skills. If these were found to be problematic with the mothers, they were considered to be "at-risk." Note that many of these indicators of a poor parental background are also correlates

of isolation from social support systems.

The next best predictor was a low birth-weight factor which is often associated with "biological" stress (birth trauma of any kind). The authors understood the relation between these two factors as a progression. Parental background factors make it difficult to care for a biologically stressed infant. This shows up later as poorly organized mother-infant interactions and increasing overall perceptions of the infant as difficult resulting in an eventual failure to care for the infant adequately (Vietze et al., 1980).

Parental Perceptions

An interesting part of this progression is how it affects the mother's perception of the infant. She can be influenced by many ontogenic factors, and unless there is a source of social support in the mother's environment to provide feedback regarding her faulty perceptions, those factors will then increase the likelihood of abuse.

Isolation causes perceptions to be restricted and often distorted due to the lack of feedback from society. The biological stress brought on by a low birth-weight infant is a factor which can be understood as being sufficient to cause child maltreatment, if the other necessary conditions are met. Garbarino (1977) proposes two necessary conditions for abuse: isolation, and a cultural acceptance of violence as a way of solving problems.

The ability of the support system to alter the perceptions of its members is also supported by research on marital stress. Burke & Weir (1977) tested 189 husband-wife pairs as to their life and job stress, satisfaction with job efforts, and mental and physical well being. They found that the quality of the marital relationship was an important moderator between experienced stress and individual well being. The person's perception that they were under stress, a self-report measure, was affected more by the quality of the relationship than by the actual level of stress-producing elements in the environment. The tendency to withdraw and isolate oneself from relationships tends to increase stress because of the imbalance between resources and needs. This is true whether it be in a marriage or in any other type of supportive relationship.

The isolation of the family has been shown to be an effective unifying theme throughout the literature on child maltreatment. Isolation may be due to the poor developmental histories of the parents, poor social skills, and various types of community patterns, all of which interact within the levels of the ecological model. Prediction of maltreatment is most successful when the parent's background and the mother-infant relationship are taken into account. The problems associated with isolation have also been shown to alter the perceptions of parents. These issues represent many problems caused by familial isolation. Prevention of that isolation is possible if

social support systems can be effectively developed and enhanced.

Social Support Systems

Isolation of the family is a problem that can be partially countered by the development and effective use of social support systems. Advances in this area have been made by the leaders of many churches and by community mental health professionals.

Churches as Support Systems

In a survey which apparently conflicts with Young's (1964) data which showed that 80% of abusers did not have a significant relationship outside the family, 80% of child abusers reported in 1974 indicated that they were affiliated with some type of Christian church. The author points out the difference between the mental health-giving and mental health-depleting forms of religion (Hastings, 1975). Some religious organizations foster poor mental health, either directly or indirectly, through their teaching and lifestyle, while others promote mental health by teaching sound principles. One factor that would account for the conflicting data is that Young's data required a "significant relationship" to be considered as a support system. Often "affiliation" with a church could mean only minimal attendance, if even that. Significant relationships are neither expected nor sought out, especially by those whose tendency it is to withdraw and isolate themselves.

The problem may not be a lack of supportiveness in most churches. Many parents who are at risk for abusiveness, however, require special efforts to facilitate social support. Hastings presents a well designed strategy to combat abuse in the church. It includes adopting new value systems, alerting social agencies, education, economic assistance, and other potential resources available through the church. Although Hastings has a Biblical basis for his proposed interventions, they are comparable to the ecological model and pervade all of its levels.

Gerald Caplan is one of the few community psychiatrists who has directly addressed the usefulness of the church. It has been all but ignored as a potential support system and even Caplan (1974) admits not giving it the attention it deserves. He states, however, that religious denominations are the most widely available organized support systems in the community and probably cater on a regular basis to more people than all the others. Part of the reason that the potential is unrealized is that the churches have only a vague understanding of their mission to the community.

Caplan & Killilea (1976) cite Dyer as defining the church as a community that is "gathered together with an end in mind, with dogma to achieve that end, and various economic, religious, and . . . psychic support in the sense that they offer a vision of something to adhere to and they struggle to obtain that vision" (p. 99). This expresses the good intentions and the potential of its people, but in

order for a church to become mobilized against child maltreatment it must develop specific services to its own congregation and the community. In order to avoid treating families as passive victims, there must also be opportunities for active participation.

The church has several characteristics that make it a particularly fruitful context for developing social support systems. It (a) is a congregation of neighbors, which enhances contact outside the church building, (b) has meetings which provide an opportunity for contact and identification, (c) provides an allegiance to a shared value system and tradition, (d) enjoins people to help each other in need, (e) provides internal supports in the form of guidelines and sanctions, (f) has opportunities for reinforcement in the form of prayer, services, reading and sermons, and (g) provides another community within the denomination should the family move (Caplan, 1974).

Personal Illustration

Membership in a church fellowship group allowed me an opportunity to observe how a support system can overcome the effects of stress brought on by a traumatic birth. Three babies were born prematurely to members of the group, all weighing a little over one pound. One died within a week, one in three weeks, and the other is now home enjoying a normal development. The stress brought upon the families was enormous, but the group functioned by supporting them in practical ways by supplying food, babysitting, and rides.

They also provided emotional support, helping some work through the grieving process and encouraging others to allow attachment to take place even though the baby was in critical condition. A phone prayer chain, which functioned somewhat like a hot-line, was developed to help meet the needs that came up, and since the pattern has been established, the prayer chain continues to be an effective tool.

Although no formal measures were taken, developmental specialists say that the surviving baby is thriving, with no residual effects of the prematurity. This may not be due entirely to the support system the family was in, but it is encouraging to think that it probably did help.

Effective Use of Support Systems

The question remains as to why there is so much reported abuse in church-affiliated people, when there is such potential for a viable support system in the church. One explanation lies in the ability of the person to make use of their support systems. Maves (1953) states that loneliness and a sense of isolation is increasingly common among church people. Because of this we organize into groups, which does not solve the problem of a chronic inability to relate warmly and trustingly to others. It is possible to be involved in several groups within any organization and still remain isolated. Even though isolation is primarily an exosystem factor, when it is used to mean a "chronic inability" to relate, then the influence of the ontogenic,

or personality trait factors and the microsystem, or interpersonal relationship factors becomes more prominent.

Powell (1980) provides a preliminary evaluation of a project that was designed to improve interactions between parent and child as well as the parent's social skills and interpersonal relationships. The intent was to apply these improvements to the way parents use their social networks to support child-rearing functions. His results indicate that what is crucial is the quality of interaction between an individual and his social network, not simply the existence of a social network. Keeping in mind the quality of interaction gives a better perspective on the repeated observations that child abusing families are isolated from formal and informal support systems (Bakan, 1971; Bennie & Sclar, 1969; Giovanni & Billingsley, 1970; Kempe, 1973; Lenowski, 1974; Light, 1973; Newberger & Hyde, 1975; Polansky, Chalmers, Bittenweiser, & Williams, 1979). These observations are based only on associations between isolation and child maltreatment, but their value is enhanced by taking into account many of the variables already mentioned. Some research done during the Great Depression, the World Wars, and natural disasters (Drabek & Boggs, 1968; Stouffers & Lazarsfeld, 1937; Koos, 1946) suggested that families who shared resources with family, friends, and neighbors coped better than isolated families. Isolated families could be caught in any combination of three different predicaments: (a) the family may not have

any support network, (b) they may have a network that is non-functional as a system, or (c) they may have a potentially functional system but be unable or unwilling to make use of it.

As a partial explanation for parents' contribution to their own isolation, Erikson's developmental stage theory is extremely useful. Parenting is seen as being a "role" that the young adult may often not be ready for. The role requires certain abilities that are developmentally sophisticated. Given the developmental background of most abusers, it is easy to see why they have not mastered previous developmental milestones before they are forced into another. During the time most people become parents, Erickson's intimacy vs. isolation stage, they are attempting to achieve intimacy in their interpersonal relationships. This becomes the focal point of their growth and their struggle. If there is stress or a fragile background, this intimacy-isolation continuum is the area in which it will first be noticed. If crises affect them by causing withdrawal and isolation, then their parenting is going to suffer from a lack of feedback and emotional support. These individual differences in developmental levels manifest themselves as ontogenic system variables often interacting with the other levels of the ecological model.

When attempts are made to provide social support, problems arise in discerning "appropriate" amounts of support. There is a large variability in the types,

quality, and quantity of support systems. Garbarino (1973) has proposed that the problem of variability is due to a mis-match between the level of stress and the availability and potency of support systems. Theoretically, a person who is under a great deal of stress can cope with it effectively if he has a potent enough support system. What is stressful to one person, however, may not be stressful to another. This may be due to individual differences, e.g., developmental level differences, or it may be due, once again, to the interaction of the forces within his environment. An attempt was made by Howze & Kotch (1984) to "disentangle" life events, stress, and support systems. They addressed the need for establishing a temporal sequence of these variables. A summary of their model (adapted from Garbarino) is presented in Figure 1.

In this model, the level of stress is a perceived phenomenon that is affected by the system. Not only does the system offer support, but it also interprets the circumstances to individuals in such a way as to alter their perception of the situation. Seen negatively, a system, such as one containing an overly anxious mother, which always interprets events as stressful, will increase stress even though support may be offered.

The sequence of events that affect child maltreatment starts with the parents' ontogenic development which predisposes them to be abusers. (This predisposition is similar to a personality structure that will change only as a

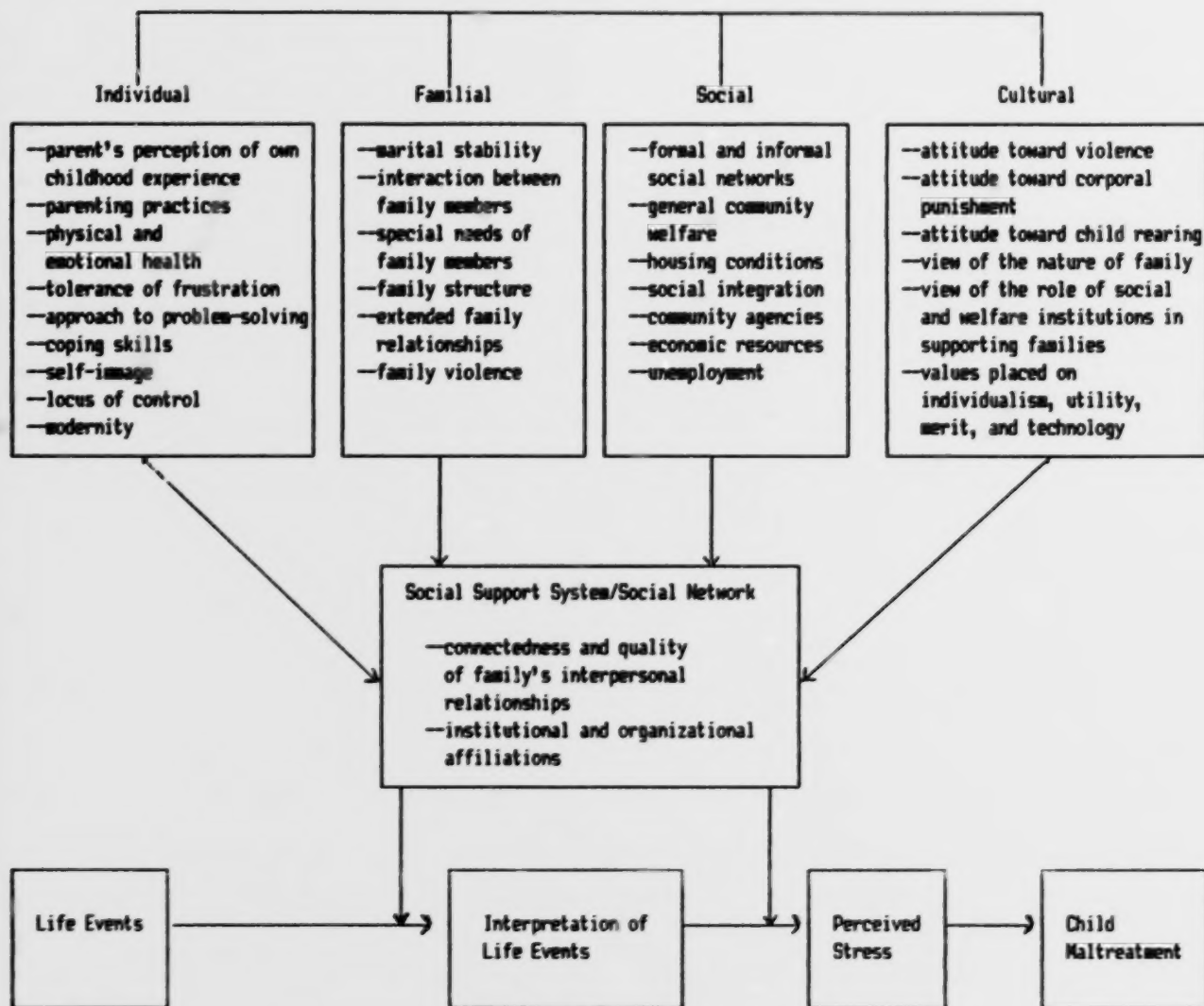


Figure 1. An Ecological Model (Howze & Kotch, 1984).

result of successfully working through crises and/or direct therapeutic intervention.) The person is in the midst of a network of friends and family, and when an event occurs that is potentially stressful, how they are affected depends directly on the support they receive from the network. Without an effective support system the person is likely to rely on previously learned coping mechanisms even if those are detrimental.

The person who consistently uses withdrawal and isolation as a coping mechanism experiences difficulty in using resources from any of the four levels of the ecological model. It carries over to family life, and hinders openness to social and cultural input relevant to interpersonal coping skills.

In a study of home-based infant education, Christensen, Schommer, and Velasquez (1984) found that parents who belonged to extensive family networks were found to be more open to change and interventions than those with restricted networks. The barrier to these needed interventions is often caused by the same fear and rigidity that is keeping the abusing family from allowing for cultural, social, and interpersonal changes.

In summary, the construct of isolation has proven to be useful in understanding child maltreatment. It is a common theme throughout the levels of the ecological model, it can be seen in many different settings including the church, and it accounts for some of the individual differences in the

way that people use their support systems. Some sample projects are described in the next section in order to highlight the application of these concepts.

Sample Projects

The Special Families Care Project (Christensen, Schommer, & Velasquez, 1984) is a two part study that exemplifies the need to include relational support within a comprehensive approach to prevention of child maltreatment. The first part of the study was designed to identify high-risk families, establish relationships, and provide an interdisciplinary team approach to intervention. The second phase is a model of effective secondary prevention. Twenty-three treatment group mothers were given intensive services consisting of two to four hours of contact each week for a minimum of 18 months. Thirty-two comparison group mothers received less intensive, health related services from an educational framework. The intensive intervention was effective at decreasing abuse, neglect, and out-of-home placement.

As part of the evaluation procedure, a parenting scale and a support scale were developed, both of which had high inter-rater and test-retest reliability. Both were fairly comprehensive in measuring different aspects of the ecology of the family. The support scale measured support from peers, immediate family, extended family, and mental health

professionals. As part of the intervention, staff members sought out and helped the mothers identify the people who could comprise their support systems. They also found that commitment on the part of the contact persons led to increased communication between them and the mothers. Attachment and caring developed into a bond between the clients and the staff members. This increased relationship was a part of the treatment group only and can be hypothesized to be one of the reasons for the difference between the two groups.

The overall results regarding the mothers' supportive networks indicate that a higher percentage of treatment group mothers than comparison group mothers were able to develop and use positive supportive relationships with family and friends. The data suggest that the project may have been more successful in assisting mothers to draw needed support from others, including the project's staff members, than in consistently improving the mothers' parenting abilities (Velasquez, Christensen, & Schommer, 1984). In a secondary prevention effort, then, it appears that available support can be fostered by a social caseworker, church worker, or any well-trained caring person who is willing to visit the family's home regularly.

The Special Families Care Project was unique in that it was able to provide intensive and extensive services. This apparently filled the gap of isolation for some of the mothers. In a similar project, Siegel, Bauman, Schaefer,

Saunders, & Ingram (1980) attempted a primary prevention intervention and assessed its impact on maternal attachment and child maltreatment. Rather than working with a high-risk population, project mothers were randomly assigned from the low-income population of a community hospital. The intervention consisted of hospital and home support and observations were made at four months and 12 months. Those with early, extended contact did better on some measures of attachment, but this accounted for only a small amount of the variance. The intervention did not reduce child maltreatment significantly.

The relative lack of success of the intervention by Siegel et al. (1980) may be due to several factors. Even though background factors were controlled for, there was no attempt to measure other sources of support that the mothers may have been receiving. Also, no attempt was made to find those mothers who had an abusive potential. There was no evaluation of the quality of the paraprofessional-mother relationship, which could be affected by the relational ability of the mother. That is, the highly social mother would have a good rapport whereas the isolated, withdrawing mother would be difficult to work with, which would hinder the effectiveness of the intervention.

Siegel et al. (1980) were looking specifically at maternal attachment variables and did not examine the support systems of the mothers or their relative isolatedness. Their emphasis was on an educational

intervention rather than on an intervention designed to improve social support systems. Christensen et al. (1984) had more success because they focused on supportive relationships in the design of their project.

The target population will often determine the best type of intervention. From these studies it appears that improving the supportiveness of relationships will have the greatest impact. Resources are generally too limited to accomplish this as thoroughly as Christensen et al. (1984), which means that only high-risk clients will be able to receive these services. Less intensive interventions can reach a larger population and thus should be used for primary prevention.

A primary prevention technique requires a much larger sample in order to be demonstrably effective, since only a small portion of the population will become abusers. If Siegel et al. (1980) had channeled their resources to bolstering already existing supports, as Christensen et al. (1984) did, they could have increased the effectiveness of their intervention. The intervention that was provided was more appropriate for secondary and tertiary interventions where there is already an identified population and usually a need for additional, outside supports due to the isolatedness of the family.

The ability to know when and where there is a need and how best to respond to that need is the first step in doing successful prevention. It also requires some means of

observation and evaluation. Isolation can often be observed in families when attempts are made to contact them. They seem to avoid making contacts for needed services, and do not allow others into their home. This behavior is usually indicative of the need for some type of intervention. One such project was started in response to observing the increasing amount of isolation in young families within a community in Australia (Barbour, 1983). The response was to provide support by utilizing the elderly population in the form of a "Dial-A-Granny" program. The idea was simple, to alleviate stress and defuse violence by placing a helper in the home. Although the study lacked a control group, the size of the response (over 400 families in less than three years) suggests the importance of the needs that were present. If the clinician is familiar with the characteristics of the abusive family, especially isolatedness, and is sensitive to their needs, successful prevention is not a difficult feat to accomplish.

Directions for Prevention

There is a wide consensus among those using an ecological model, the community oriented professional, and the pastoral counselor, that provision of support systems is the most important tool against child maltreatment (Watkins & Bradbard, 1982).

Some wish to combat isolation directly, calling for changes that include (a) resisting extreme forms of cultural sanction for privacy, (b) establishing intrusive monitoring networks, (c) increased legal sanction favoring intrusion, and (d) establishing the idea that a right of the child is access to the outside world (Garbarino, 1977).

Others want to provide a more comprehensive approach, bolstering existing programs and filling the gaps with new ones. Many suggestions for types of programs have been developed separately, yet overlap with some consistency. Helfer (1982) and Cohn (1982) have both developed well planned programs within their own communities which are useful to anyone who is interested in pursuing prevention.

A combined summary of their suggestions include the following:

1. Perinatal support programs--to prepare individuals for the job of parenting and to enhance parent-child bonding.
2. Education for parents--to provide parents with information about child development and skills in caring for children.

3. Mutual aid programs, neighborhood support groups to reduce social isolation.

4. Public information and campaigns designed to educate people regarding violence in the home.

5. Family support services, including health care, family planning, child care, crisis care such as hotline counselors, marriage counseling and other related services.

6. Home visitor programs for all new parents, especially through the first one to two years.

The professional in the community is called on to initiate new support systems inside and outside community institutions, including the church. He or she should also be there to offer consultation and education to the leaders of existing support systems as well as to members of unorganized, informal networks (Caplan, 1964).

There are a myriad of ways in which the clinician or researcher could channel his energies against child maltreatment. Treatment will always be needed, However, prevention must become a priority if we hope to decrease the pain caused by emotional and physical maltreatment of children.

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